

WINTER SCUBA

Wednesday, January 2, 2008; Page C02

Got the urge to submerge? At this dismal time of year, it's downright therapeutic, and any reasonably fit person age 10 or older can become a certified scuba diver for as little as a few hundred bucks.

The Washington area has more than a dozen dive schools, all of which offer the minimum certification requirements: 12 to 18 hours of weekend or evening class time and course work (yes, there are exams), about eight to 12 hours of pool instruction and a day-long series of "open water" tests you can take in a nearby lake or quarry, or -- strongly recommended -- in Florida and points south, where water temperatures are frequently above 80 degrees.

Three certifying organizations -- the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, National Association of Underwater Instructors and YMCA -- offer generally equivalent programs. A card from any of them will allow you to buy air anywhere in the world. Beyond a swimsuit, you don't need any gear to get started, but you'll want your own mask and fins for the pool work. (Do not buy any equipment until you've talked to a pro; correct fit is harder than it looks.)

Average physical strength is more than plenty. After all, the ultimate goal is to hover motionless over a coral ecosystem, looking at fantastic creatures and colors you'd otherwise need serious illegal drugs to see. Seniors, smokers and folks with certain medical conditions will need a physician's approval for lessons; most schools require it for all students.

Wherever you live, there's probably an outfit nearby. The top of the line in the area is *SPE Dive School* in Chevy Chase (301-657-2266, <http://www.scubaedu.com>). For the nearest YMCA, check <http://www.ymcascuba.org>.